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The Winds Are Ablowin

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Address by
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I often have wondered what would have happened to the course of history if...

It was early in the evening of July 16, 1945. As an Army officer, I was serving a night duty stint in the Press Branch of the War Department Bureau of Public Relations in the Pentagon in Washington.

The Associated Press called.

"We have a report out of Santa Fe, New Mexico," an AP deskman said. "Early this morning, a flash of light was observed in the sky, and some windows were broken in homes and buildings in Santa Fe. Can you tell me what may have caused this, and if you can, may the AP service the story on its national wire?"

Our nation was still at war, and a voluntary censorship code was in operation.

Several hours later, after several telephone calls, I was authorized to tell the Associated Press that "An explosion and fire occurred early today in an ammunition dump at Alamogordo Army Air Force Base in New Mexico. The fire was brought quickly under control. There were no casualties. You are authorized to place this on the national wire."

I often have wondered what would have happened to the course of history if the event that occurred at 5:30 A.M. on that day -- the firing of the world's first atomic bomb -- had been made known at that time to the American people, and to the people of Japan.

Three weeks later, an atomic bomb was dropped over Hiroshima.

I tell this story today to make a point: That the truth, no matter how difficult it may be at times to tell, has within itself the power to dramatically change the course of history.

We live today in an era in which the truth is catching up with us. It is becoming increasingly difficult to hide. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly apparent that to hide the truth is to court disaster.

We are witnessing -- borrowing a phrase from Adlai Stevenson -- the "rising expectations" of a public that has raised its sights on what it expects from the institutions that serve it. And, in raising its sights, it has found its institutions lacking.

It is no accident that between 1965 and 1973 the degree of the public's confidence in its institutions has, with rare exceptions, diminished. A look at a recent Harris poll provides the evidence.

From 1965 to 1973, confidence of the public in the institution of medicine fell from 72 percent to 57 percent.

Confidence in higher educational institutions fell from 61 percent to 44 percent; in the military from 62 percent to 40 percent; organized religion from 41 to 36 percent; in the United States Supreme Court from 51 to 33 percent; in the U.S. Senate from 42 to 30; in major companies from 55 to 29; in the House of Representatives from 42 to 29; in organized labor from 22 to 20; and in the Executive Branch of the Government from 41 to 19.

All of us in this room should be asking ourselves why this has happened, and what can be done about it.

Is this lessening of confidence caused by a rise in our level of educational attainment?

According to a recent report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, the percentage of our population with educational attainment of four years of high school or more went from 41.1 percent to 52.4 percent between 1960 and 1970. But the Harris results show little, if any, difference between the attitudes of those with less education than those who are graduates of college.

In attitudes toward major companies, for example, 29 percent of the population with an education up to the 8th grade have confidence in major companies. The figure is the same for the college educated. The public relations profession has a big stake in these believability figures. In many cases, you are the source -- and the conduit -- of news about companies and corporations.

Think of the following comment, from the Carnegie study, as applying not solely to the campus, but to the other institutions I have mentioned, including big business, medicine, the military, organized religion, the Supreme Court, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, organized labor and the Executive Branch of our Federal government:

"A lack of confidence now exists in what is being done, in conceptions of what should be done, in the processes for making changes...

"A traumatic loss of assured progress, of the inevitability of a better future, has occurred. Instead there has developed

more of a nostalgia for a Paradise Lost. The tone of so much academic thought is now more an attitude of how to hold on to as much of the past as possible -- or even to retrieve lost aspects of it -- rather than of how to confront the future directly; or how to avoid change, since most possible changes are thought to be unfavorable or even disastrous, rather than of how to plan and support constructive new developments. The prevalent attitude is more to look back with longing than to look ahead with hope -- the situation may be bad but it cannot be improved; the Golden Age of the past is more attractive than any conceivable prospects for the future...

"...The social idealism and social optimism that characterized the New Deal and the period following World War II have given way to cynicism and to pessimism. This idealism and optimism led to substantial accomplishments. Where may cynicism and pessimism, if long continued, lead?"

All of us can find reasons why this pessimism exists, this cynicism, this lack of hope, this nostalgia for a past that, frankly, often was not that glorious.

We can recall, among many other transgressions of our times:

The great civil rights struggle of the late 50's and 60's, which caught organized religion, with rare exceptions, in the hypocrisy of preaching one thing but doing another.

A medical profession willing, in too many instances, to let the poor, the underprivileged, go without adequate care.

The military, losing its soul in the jungles of Vietnam.

Major companies, where the Dow Jones and profits too often became the only criteria of success, rather than performance of products or service. The strength of the consumer movement today is testimony of the disillusionment of large segments of the public with the performance of big business.

Organized labor, allowing autocratic powermongers often to lead it into strikes or inflationary raises against the public interest.

Higher educational institutions, too often educating for the quantities of life rather than for the qualities of living.

The Supreme Court, after supporting the dignity of man, backing away from that struggle.

The Congress, where reelection, to most, became more important than maintaining its separate powers; where junketeering became a way to get free vacations at the trough of public taxes.

And the Executive Branch of the Federal government, enmeshed in Watergate and a thing called "benign neglect."

You will notice that up to now I have made no references to the media. I have done this intentionally.

The same Harris poll that showed a diminution of credibility on the part of other institutions, also surveyed public attitudes toward television news and the press.

In 1965, 25 percent of the public expressed confidence in television news. By 1972, that confidence had sunk to 17 percent. But in 1973, it went up, to 41 percent.

In 1965, 29 percent expressed confidence in the press. By 1972, that confidence was down to 18 percent. And in 1973, it had gone up to 30 percent.

These figures, showing a recent increase in credibility, run counter to the figures pertaining to all of the other

institutions included in the Harris survey.

Why the difference?

I believe we must attribute this abrupt change to three reasons:

1. The public disgrace of Spiro T. Agnew after he, and other members of the Administration, had convinced a large segment of the American population that the media was committing a sin by dealing with harsh reality; that "bad news" was weakening the nation's fabric. The late Wally Cox used to have a night club act in which he went on a "news diet" -- he would eat only when the news was good. "So far," he said, "I've lost only 100 pounds."

2. To two young reporters of The Washington Post who persisted until they brought the crime of Watergate into the open, thereby causing a largely dormant, cowed media to do what it should have been doing all along -- digging for the truth.

3. To other members of the media who, shamed by the fact that they had not uncovered Watergate, began to take a long, hard look at themselves and their role in a free society and set about to do something about that role.

The media, however, can take little pride in its credibility "comeback." After all, a 41 percent TV news confidence rating is only one percent above the military's rating, post Vietnam. And the press 30 percent rating makes it no more credible than the U.S. Senate; far less credible than our universities and colleges.

As a result, we are witnessing today a degree of self-examination and self-criticism on the part of the media without precedent in our nation's history. Committees on ethics, journalism reviews, ombudsmen, seminars, symposiums, articles on First Amendment rights and obligations are commonplace in the journalism scene today. There is a growing awareness within the media that low credibility is an open

invitation for the government to move in, with regulation. And it is moving in, with a myriad of subpoenas and contempt citations against reporters and news organizations, antitrust suits, harassment of TV scheduling procedures, threats to license renewals, "trial balloon" suggestions regarding the production of programs, the jailing of reporters, and suits involving access and equal space, as well as equal time.

It was this threat -- of government regulation of a free press -- that led, 20 years ago, to establishment in Great Britain of the British Press Council.

In 1953, public criticism of the British press induced some politicians to propose a statutory council to monitor the press. That, you may be sure, got the attention of publishers and journalists, who until then had been reluctant to set up an industry council proposed by a Royal Commission in 1949.

The chief stated aims of the British Press Council are to preserve freedom of the press, to consider complaints about the conduct of the press and the conduct of persons and organizations toward the press, and to keep under scrutiny attempts to restrict access to information of public interest.

These, in essence, are the objectives of the National News Council here in this country, established last year after a lengthy study by a task force brought together by the Twentieth Century Fund.

In its report, the task force said:

"Editors and publishers may fear that a media council will stimulate public hostility; some even suspect that it might curtail rather than preserve their freedom. The core of the media council idea, however, is the effort to make press freedom more secure by

providing an independent forum for debate about media responsibility and performance, so that such debate need not take place in government hearing rooms or on the political campaign trail. The Task Force unanimously believes that government should not be involved in the evaluation of press practices."

But the task force felt that the public, to regain its confidence in the press, did need an independent body that could hear its complaints about specific news stories and that could make a detached appraisal of the accuracy and fairness of the stories complained of. Nor was there a body that could independently critique and assess charges against the press made by government officials and pressure groups. A National News Council could provide the vehicle for such assessments. To do this work, the task force recommended a council that limited its investigations to the major national suppliers of news -- the major wire services, national newspapers and magazines, the national television and radio networks.

Last May, the Council was established, using grants from the Twentieth Century Fund, the John and Mary Markle Foundation and other foundations. No contributions may be accepted from any government or governmental agency. The Council may have among its fifteen members no owner or employee of any of the nationwide suppliers of news, nor any government official.

It is made up of nine public members and six persons associated with the broadcast and print media. Its membership includes former Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, Roger J. Traynor; the dean of the Law School of New York University,

Robert B. McKay; the president of the Children's Television Workshop, Joan Ganz Cooney; a former chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Thomas B. Curtis; the president of the National Council of Negro Women, Dorothy Height; and a former U.S. Senator from Tennessee, Albert Gore.

The certificate of incorporation of the Council says we are "to serve the public interest in preserving freedom of communication and advancing accurate and fair reporting of news." We see those two aims as equally important. We think the achievement of one depends on achievement of the other.

The Council's operating structure reflects these twin objectives. We have two working committees, one dealing with freedom of the press, the other with complaints filed with the Council concerning accuracy and fairness of news reports.

The committee on press freedom will take up complaints filed by the media on such matters as attempts to restrict access to information of interest to the public. It has the responsibility of initiating research on the preservation of freedom of communications.

One such study is already under way. The Council commissioned Prof. Benno Schmidt of the Columbia University Law School to make a study and report on access to the media, both print and electronic.

Newspaper publishers and editors are particularly worried about a decision of the Florida Supreme Court that would extend

the fairness doctrine to print. The court ruled that a Florida politician had the right to equal space in The Miami Herald to reply to a Herald editorial attacking him. The Herald has appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Early in our work we looked into the charge by President Nixon at his October 26, 1973, news conference that reporting by the national networks on Watergate had been "outrageous, vicious, distorted." For three months we pressed the White House to list specific network reports the President had in mind. The White House turned down the Council's request. Finally, the Council adopted a finding that said: "We believe it is seriously detrimental to the public interest for the President to leave harsh criticisms of the television networks unsupported by specific details that could be evaluated objectively by an impartial body."

In other areas, the Council staff and the grievance committee are investigating complaints from private citizens about news reports that have appeared in the national press or on network television.

The National News Council has no power other than the power to make public its findings. We think, however, that in its present mood of self-analysis, much of the press will give consideration to those findings.

The National News Council will not resolve all of the problems facing the print and broadcast media. Realistically, that would be impossible. Nor will the Council answer all of

the criticisms voiced today by the public and politicians. It will, however, earnestly seek to find the truth in whatever complaints and studies it undertakes.

Last Sunday, I attended a youth service at a church in Larchmont, New York. Three young people, in their teens, took turns at occupying the pulpit. They spoke of love, of trust, of hope. They called their brief talks sermonettes. They spoke of their dreams; their dreams of the future. And they sang:

"What makes a dream rise in some imprisoned soul
A dream that lights a world of darkness and despair?
What makes a dream rise? Well, it's enough to know
That there are winds and dreams and love blooms anywhere."

"Give us the truth," one of them said. "We ask no less."

"Rising expectations!"

Certainly, as these young people attest, we shall never again live in a world where the truth can be so easily, and disastrously submerged, as it has been in the past, by expediency.

The truth is expected of you here today. Indeed, it is demanded, not by a National News Council, which can only request, but by a public -- and young people -- fed up with mockery and sham. And those who fail to heed this demand simply are not listening to the winds that are ablowin'.